

What the Sisters Mean to Me

Sister Bernetta Quinn

CST 1942 graduate; Taught at CST 1946 - 1966

Sister Bernetta was short, maybe 5'2". She was neither heavy nor too thin. She had tiny hands. Her habit was floor length, the mark of her being a Franciscan Sister. Her white wimple and short black veil hid most of her head and hair, although sometimes a little grey hair escaped onto her face. It was hard to tell her age. I guess she was probably in her sixties. She had a PhD in Philosophy from the Catholic University of Washington, DC, after obtaining a Masters at the University of Wisconsin, but this information never came up during my relationship with her. She was humble. She emitted a sense of appreciation and affection for her students. I think because the fact that they were in her class indicated that they shared a love of literature and poetry with her.

At my women's college in Winona, Minnesota, I had Sister Bernetta for several classes, although now I cannot remember how many there were or what specific classes they were. I know I always looked forward to time in her classroom. There were usually only ten or twelve students in the class. How lucky I was to have such an intimate setting in my academic life. Sister had a steady quiet voice, a smile and a twinkle in her eye. I loved it when she would read. Sometimes she had us reading or reciting memorized works like ee cummings' "i thank You God for most this amazing day." Other times she lectured. She did not talk of her travels her acquaintances or her accomplishments.

I was not a disciplined student but I did complete assignments - sometimes with more commitment than others. In her classes we frequently turned in work; a short story, a critique or a poem. Sometimes the work came easily and sometimes it seemed impossible to accomplish, I was often unprepared for the grade I would receive. At times I was pleasantly surprised and other times not so much, but I always appreciated and learned from the comments she made on my papers. She had clearly spent time on each one. When turning in a writing, which she preferred in longhand, she would have us fold the paper in half lengthwise. I always wondered why that was.

The year I studied in Ireland, Sister Bernetta was in Dublin on a sabbatical. She was doing research on James Joyce and W.B. Yeats. She took the time to invite two of

us to lunch shortly after we arrived; it was my first personal encounter with her and I felt honored and very grown up. She also took us to a card shop connected to the Cuala Press. The shop sold prints and cards with poetry by Yeats and colored drawings, by his brother Jack. This store, and the attached printing shop, were owned by Yeats' sister, Elizabeth.

In my classroom time with Sister, she introduced us to many writers and poets. After her death in 2003, I learned pieces of her personal life including that she was a voracious correspondent with many of these writers and poets and their family members, among them were: Ezra Pound; Wallace Stevens; William Carlos Williams; Robert Penn Warren; James Wright; Brendan Behan; and Seamus Heaney. I learned that there is a collection of her correspondence, letters and papers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and another collection in the library at Yale.

I also learned that she published a book of her own poetry. The first poem in this book is titled "After Eye Surgery and a Broken Leg." I learned that she suffered in her life but I did not see that. She did not share that. She really was a very private person. She rose above personal struggles studying, traveling and writing poetry. These things she did not share as she stood at the podium before us. She kept me young and innocent. Sister Bernetta impacted my life while I was in my late teens and early 20's. I can still see her clearly. Her teaching and demeanor were a gift to me then and now. I would love to be back in that classroom with her spending an entire class teasing out the meaning of a Roethke poem. What a luxury that was. I am now humbled by awareness of her intelligence, the volume of her body of work and her ability to hone it down into a forty-minute class.

I majored in English; a major with no career attached to it. I graduated with no direct means of supporting myself with this degree; maybe its value is in the emotional support I've gained. The joy and appreciation for literature, theater and poetry Sister Bernetta instilled in me has sustained me all these years, and though not a financial boon, it has been a source of much pleasure.

The last time I saw Sister Bernetta was during a class reunion in Winona. We were leaving a liturgy from our college chapel. This had been her campus and college chapel before she entered the convent. On this day she had come down from Rochester in a van with several other Sisters. As I approached her from behind to try to connect with her, the others who were assisting her into the van surrounded her – seemingly protecting her from any encounter with alumnae. She did not see me there, hoping to take her hand and inquire about her, reminisce and thank her. I thought then what an effort it looked like for her to get around, to get into that van

and ride for an hour, attend a liturgy in our beautiful chapel with the rose window and campanile and then to immediately turn around and go home. What motivated her to expend all that energy for this return to Winona? Perhaps her student days and those days 35 years ago when she taught English meant that much to her. She too wished to return to her own campus and one of the colleges at which she taught. Maybe she gained as much as she gave. Maybe she, too, would love to be back in that classroom with us. Maybe she was remembering ee cummings' "now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened."

Rest in Peace, Sister, just as you rest, so gently, in my memory.

Gege McKay Hodgson, CST 1969